

Name: _____ Date: _____

An excerpt from Life in Outer Space -

Written by Melissa Keil

I start this Monday by falling flat on my behind. A normal guy might think his day could only improve from here. I seriously doubt this is going to be the case.

I hear laughter and clapping. Someone cheers.

Above me, a giant sign hangs precariously from the corridor ceiling: a pink and purple, glitter-encrusted symbol of doom, handmade by the Spring Dance Committee.

Justin Zigoni takes a flying leap over me and slaps the sign with his hand. A shower of glitter descends from the ceiling and a piece lodges itself in my eyeball.

I close my eyes.

I wonder if it's possible to induce a fatal stroke?

Justin cheers again, and pumps his fists above his head. A crowd has formed around him – a swarm of non-specific girls, and some guys who all seem to be wearing the same shoes. Assorted Vessels of Wank, gathering their day's supply of glee from my butt-planting like squirrels sorting nuts.

If there was an award for the world's biggest high school cliché, Justin Zigoni would not only win, but they'd name the award after him as well. He would, most probably, gain permanent induction into the High School Moron Hall of Fame.

Judging by the look of pure smug on Justin's face, I'm assuming he was responsible for what passes for wit at Bowen Lakes Secondary: tipping a bottle of cleaning wax on the floor right in front of my locker.

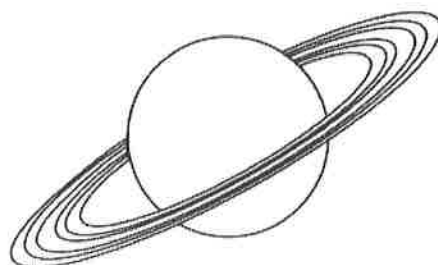
"Nice trip, Sammy?" Justin calls. The Vessels of Wank and their various minions laugh.

No-one calls me Sammy. My mother occasionally throws a 'Samuel,' but I am, and have always been, just Sam. Sammy is a name for five-year-olds and game-show hosts and Shiny Happy People.

I am, definitely, not a Sammy.

Mike is peering down at me with semi-concern. Semi, because a) my best friend's face rarely shows more than semi-anything, and b) Mike knows that displaying anything more will only lead to additional torment when I do, eventually, stand. I remain frozen for approximately nine more seconds until Mike holds out a hand and yanks me to my feet.

Adrian appears beside me, glaring down the corridor. He has his about-to-open-a-can-of- you-know-what face on. Objectively, Adrian Radley has zero cans of you-know-what to open. I fear that this day is about to go from bad to epic-level suckage.



Mike gathers the muesli bars that have spilt from my hoodie pocket. Then he adjusts his glasses and faces Justin with a frown.

"You're a knob, Justin," Mike murmurs.

"What's that, dumb-boy?" Justin says, hand to his ear like he's deaf and not just stupid.

I make the logical decision not to react. Adrian however, has other ideas. Adrian barrels past, and it's only a last-minute survival reflex that makes me reach out and grab him by the hood of his jumper.

"Control the Troll, Sammy," Justin says. He's still laughing, but it's the laugh that movie supervillains do, right before they release the radioactive sharks.

Adrian barely comes up to my armpit. He has recently developed a layer of fuzz that stretches from ear to ear across the bottom part of his chin, which he refuses to shave. He has not cut his curly hair in years. He is very slightly overweight. I can see how, to people ill-informed about mythical cave-dwellers, Adrian might be considered somewhat troll-adjacent. Adrian has been known as the Troll since year eight. I'm not even sure if he minds anymore.

"It's okay, Adrian," I mutter.

Adrian's face has turned purple. I suspect he is about to launch into a rant peppered with *Star Trek* references, but Mike distracts him with a muesli bar, and then with gathering my books, which are scattered across the corridor.

Justin smirks. "Seriously, if this loser factory was awarding Losers of the Year, you boys would be up for a Loser Grammy or something."

That statement makes no sense, but it doesn't matter to the Vessels. They laugh. I fantasize about Leatherface from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* making an appearance in the school corridor. Then the bell rings, and Justin hip-and-shoulders me as he passes. I am taller than him, but he belongs to a more enhance male genus. I allow myself to be shoved into the lockers.

The guys follow him, glaring at us. The girls disperse, giggling.

Adrian and Mike appear at my side. I straighten my jumper. "Have I mentioned I hate my life?"

Mike sighs. "Frequently." He looks at me blankly. "Ready for English?"

"I could so take that guy," Adrian growls.

"Yea," says Mike, "And then we could take you to Emergency. Rein it in."

We stand where we are for nineteen seconds, a silent agreement to wait for the length of time it will take the Vessels to reach our English classroom. We don't look at each other. But when an appropriate interval of time has passed, we start to walk together.